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Professor Vincent Alan McClelland, MA, PhD, FRHistS

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The death of Vincent Alan McClelland at the age of 92, on 10 September 2025, saw the passing of a scholar who had made an exceptionally rich contribution to Catholic education and historical scholarship over a period of more than six decades. Born in Clitheroe, Lancashire, on 3 March 1933, Alan (as he preferred to be known) was the only son of Robert McClelland and Elizabeth (née Walsh). After secondary education at Clitheroe Royal Grammar School, he read English at the University of Sheffield. There, he completed an MA in American history in 1955, followed by a Diploma in Education in 1956, soon thereafter becoming a secondary school teacher in Oldham, Lancashire.

In 1957, at the University of Birmingham, he secured a second MA in history. This formed the basis of his first book on Cardinal Manning which quickly established his reputation as a scholar.[1] Alan then served as a Lecturer in Education, first at Notre Dame College of Education, Mount Pleasant, Liverpool (1962–64), and then at the University of Liverpool School and Institute of Education (1964–69). Like its counterparts in many other British civic universities at that time, the latter institution was then at the height of its post-war influence as an Area Training Organization (ATO).

Following the 1944 McNair Report, ATOs were responsible for validating courses, setting syllabuses, and conducting examinations for affiliate colleges engaged in teacher education in their region: in the case of the University of Liverpool, a host of affiliate colleges included Christ's College of Education (now part of Liverpool Hope University), founded in 1964 as the first co-educational Catholic college of education in Britain. There, Alan served as a governor during his years in Liverpool and, through this institutional link, he was invited in February 1968 to become the first Chair of the then newly formed North West Catholic History Society. The educational

[1] Vincent Alan McClelland, *Cardinal Manning: His Public Life and Influence, 1865–92* (Oxford University Press, 1962).

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culture in which Alan found himself during his years in Liverpool—providing a combination of teacher education and Catholic history—was to characterize the rest of his academic career and his own influence over countless future students worldwide.

By the end of 1968, Alan had secured his PhD at the University of Sheffield under the tutelage of the distinguished historian of education, Professor Walter Harry Green Armytage (1915–96), arguably one of the last great polymaths of twentieth-century British academia. Under Armytage's continuing guidance, Alan's two-volume doctoral thesis on English Catholics and Higher Education was re-worked and substantially abridged and published in 1973.[2]

Alan's appointment as Professor of Education at University College, Cork, in 1969, brought new life to both teacher education and Catholic historical scholarship in the Republic of Ireland. On his arrival in Ireland, the Department of Education at Cork was in a parlous state: it was poorly staffed and the Chair of Education had been vacant for seven years. The one-year Higher Diploma in Education, a required qualification for secondary-level teaching, was open to all graduates, as there was no admission limit on numbers. This often resulted in enormous cohorts of students, not all of them fully motivated. Radical reform of that programme was clearly needed and the National University of Ireland (NUI) was determined to attract someone with proven experience, leadership skills, and energy to refresh and develop the work of its Education Department in Cork. Famously, President Éamon de Valera, by using his casting vote within the Senate of the NUI to confirm the appointment of a young, non-Irish-speaking Englishman, helped resolve that situation.

Within a few years, everything had changed: the Higher Diploma course at Cork had gained a reputation nationally as a seriously demanding programme; admission numbers had been capped, leading to a significant improvement in the quality of students; a Masters programme in Education had been introduced, allowing serving teachers to study on Saturdays; and Alan's on-going publishing output in both the history of education and in Catholic history generated interest from a wide range of applicants for PhD-level research.

Drawing on his Liverpool ATO outreach experience, Alan initiated a new Bachelor of Education degree for primary-level teachers at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick, as well as at Thomond College in the same city. These developments attracted attention throughout the whole island of Ireland. On an academic visit to Belfast, when introduced to the Reverend Ian Paisley as 'an Englishman, a Roman Catholic, and Professor of Education in Cork', Paisley retorted—

[2] Vincent Alan McClelland, *English Roman Catholics and Higher Education, 1830–1903* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973).

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jokingly—'a very unstable mixture!' There was, however, no instability: in all of his pioneering developmental work, Alan was ably assisted by his then secretary, Marie O'Callaghan, whom he married in 1972 and whom he encouraged to develop her own career, first as a teacher and then as a very successful headteacher, as well as a highly accomplished researcher of Catholic educational history.

On his appointment in 1978 as Professor of Educational Studies at the University of Hull, Alan embarked on what proved to be an intense twenty-year programme of pioneering developmental work. As Dean of the School of Education, he again began developing academic programmes at masters and doctoral levels both internally and externally. Some of these programmes had international reach, with new ventures in Gibraltar, Hong Kong, and the British Virgin Islands.

Nearer home, he launched new University of Hull masters and doctoral programmes at Maryvale Institute in Birmingham, where he was a Foundation Fellow and Dean of Graduate Research, and also at the Presentation Brothers' Christian Leadership in Education Office in Cork. From these two ventures alone, several hundred students graduated with masters or doctoral degrees, many with distinction.

Alan McClelland's skills as an external examiner and his empathy with students, particularly at doctoral level, were highly valued: during his career, he was examiner in no fewer than sixteen universities. In all of his academic endeavours, he worked tirelessly, leading by example, and he expected the same of his colleagues: any member of his staff who might hesitate momentarily, when asked to take on an additional responsibility, particularly during periods of academic development and outreach, would be gently reminded that 'a beaver never died of hard work'.

Immediately following Alan's retirement in 1998, an independent report by Mary Atherton and Gerald Grace demonstrated that a quarter of all the doctoral and masters dissertations on Catholic education in the British Isles during the previous decade had emanated from the University of Hull—a testament indeed to Alan McClelland's unwavering focus and dedication.[3] This was saluted shortly thereafter when Alan was nominated as the first Anatole von Hügel Fellow at St Edmund's College, Cambridge.

Alan McClelland's contribution to the Catholic Record Society over many decades paralleled his contribution to the university world. Successively a member of the CRS Council, editor of *Recusant History* (1990–2010), Chair of the CRS Council, and member of its Editorial Board, Alan drew upon his vast international academic experience:

[3] Mary Atherton and Gerald Grace, *Doctoral and Masters Theses and Dissertations on Catholic Education in the UK and Ireland* (London: University of London Institute of Education, 1999).

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this helped the CRS further develop and extend its own outreach both to the world of scholarship and to a more general public interested in the Catholic history of the British Isles in the period following the Reformation. In 1999, in anticipation of the 150th anniversary in 2000 of the restoration of the hierarchy in England and Wales, Alan McClelland and Michael Hodgetts co-edited a volume of essays with which many readers of this journal will be familiar.[4] As a marker of the esteem in which Alan was held, the CRS published in 2005 a *festschrift* of sixteen essays written by his colleagues and friends.[5] Four years later, in 2009, Alan's work was crowned with the papal decoration *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* in recognition of his many contributions to Catholic life over more than forty years.

Following Alan's death, his widow, Marie, and his daughter, Alkelda, received many letters and messages of condolence, giving thanks for his approachability, kindness, generosity, unfailing help, professionalism, and quiet faith. One in particular, from an academic historian (here quoted with due permission), both summed up the feelings of many towards Vincent Alan McClelland and stands as a worthy epitaph to his memory:

> His distinguished contribution to scholarship goes without question, but the spirit in which he pursued it was unique, in his writings, teaching, supervisions and administrative duties, a calm rationality which disarmed criticism and made friends and disciples of the workers in the same area or discipline. They are more like a family than a body of successful academics, and I am proud and grateful to be one of them.

Requiescat in pace

[4] Vincent Alan McClelland and Michael Hodgetts, eds. *From without the Flaminian Gate: 150 Years of Roman Catholicism in England and Wales, 1850–2000* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999).

[5] Sheridan Gilley, ed. *Victorian Churches and Churchmen: Essays Presented to Vincent Alan McClelland* (CRS Monograph Series, Volume 7, The Boydell Press, 2005).

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